

Race and O.J.

by **Thandabantu Iverson**

One of the most precious resources African Americans can nurture is an ability to clearly assess the complex conditions of our lives. Yet today in the United States, we are confronted by events that we find as baffling as they are discomfiting. Consider the outrageous (yet familiar) case of Tawana Brawley or the public confrontation of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas. Reflect upon the unflattering narrative of Desiree Washington and Mike Tyson or the sordid suspicions that have swirled about Michael Jackson. And now, while we are still reeling, let us try to soberly examine the horrific web of murder, domestic violence, and obsession that has forever bound Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman to O.J. Simpson.

In each of these complicated cases, the terrible human tragedies have been dangerously compounded by an inability to face "the real deal." These are not fundamentally matters of "conspiracy." These are not well-fabricated plots to present African Americans in despicable and disempowering terms. While the question of imaging is important in all of this, a more disturbing fact is that many of us have a tendency to evaluate almost every aspect of African American experience exclusively in terms of race.

Admittedly, the virulent and ubiquitous nature of race, as both social process and ideology, seems to warrant our wariness about it in every second of our existence. Yet all too frequently we ignore (or dismiss) the fact that as a group battered by several different oppressions, we cannot hope to make sense of our lives if we focus exclusively on one single form. Thus, the complex workings of gender, sexuality, class and race seem too intricate to sort out, while the tangled skein of our diverse dominations and our choices seems too painfully revealing to unravel.

So why do we persist in trying to understand our lives by viewing them mainly through the lens of race? And why is this "race approach" insufficient, even if necessary? Perhaps a brief examination of aspects of the "O.J. Simpson case" can help us to approach some answers.

THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN COMMODITY

The best place to begin is to ask the question so recently and poignantly raised by O.J. himself: How did he land in such a predicament and become "this lost person"?

When Orenthal James Simpson was growing up in San Francisco, such a predicament was as unimaginable as the prospect of becoming a star in America's pantheon of larger-than-life celebrities. As Orenthal and his family struggled with the stigmas and silences of Black working-class obscurity in the economically and socially difficult times of the 1950s and early 1960s, another African American athlete of incredible prowess, Jim Brown, had caught the attention of sports fans and corporate hero-makers. But Brown was militantly outspoken about racism. He always seemed unwilling to present himself in a way that very powerful (and less powerful) whites would find accommodating.

The brother from Potrero Hill, on the other hand, believed that his athletic ability and personal charm could catapult him far beyond his working-class roots if he simply did "his own thing." During the heady years of Black Power, we cheered as he broke records and won honors -- not by confronting, but always, it seemed, by outrunning and outmaneuvering the race and class demons that bedeviled us. Dodging adversity with graceful deftness, Simpson seemed unstoppable, and we were proud. Astute corporate captains noted our pride, as well as that Simpson smile, and soon concluded that if this Heisman trophy winner and NFL great was so appealing to us, he could become a real asset to them as well. Thus began the process by which Orenthal James was turned into "O.J."-- an American legend.

The commodification of O.J. was certainly not an unusual feature of American life. It is in the nature of American capitalism that all social relations (including those of professional sports) become significant only to the extent that they become means for profitable exchanges. This process by which O.J. became a commodity is also crucial to the status quo because it is the continuous means by which human beings become reinforcers of the values and practices that comprise their own exploitation. In a country hierarchically ordered by several distinct oppressions, the production of O.J. as a national hero was a masterful corporate turn of the wheel to make the American reality seem "natural" and "necessary." The spectacle of O.J. "Livin' large" in opulent, money-green detail also made the American hierarchy seem less arduous, less impossible to navigate. Perhaps, contrary to the wisdom of Malcolm X, it was even "fair." Since O.J. was making it, we were encouraged to believe that we could make it too. And if we could not fake and run like O.J., if we could not smile becomingly and enunciate like O.J., if our hard work could never achieve celebrity for us, we could still watch him on television on the weekends after work and vicariously experience the successes that made the ritual of professional sports as seductive as it was lucrative.

O.J. was obviously Black. Yet to all who saw him bounding through airports, the only significant differences between O.J. and Clark Kent seemed to be their physical features. These features, of course, have always been the visible stuff of racialized superiority and inferiority. Yet here, with the semi-mythical "Juice," race itself was being used to render race less relevant. Even though the rejection of difference remained an essential characteristic of U.S. institutions, the ideological crux of "the Juice" was to foster an illusory unity.

This unifying function was accomplished largely because O.J. had become a major metaphor of American values. The sanctity of violence as a means of "winning." Heterosexist masculinity. The primacy of physicality and "good looks" over spiritual force. Individual financial success. The "color-blind" pursuit of equality where "being equal" means being the same as powerful white men. All this was the message so artfully packaged as "O.J."

As we reflect upon this process by which O.J. was "made in America," a potentially liberating insight becomes obvious: while the process has involved race matters, it has never been exclusively a matter of race. We can only fully understand O.J.'s trajectory by acknowledging the powerful interactions of race, gender, and class.

YOU CAN RUN, BUT HOW LONG CAN YOU HIDE?

The making of O.J. was extremely seductive for all of us. Like Simpson himself, we were seduced into believing that he was the mythical Man from Hertz. We told ourselves that it didn't matter that he was selling himself. That, we rationalized, is the way of the world. And besides, he got paid.

O.J. knew the truth. He knew that while he was busy running through airports he needed to stop and deal with the ugly facts of his battering and abusive behavior toward the women in his life. He knew, just as many of us know when we are hurting others, when we ourselves are hurting. And like many of us, O.J. did not stop. He kept on running because being "a man" was his business, and business is always more important than getting healed (or healing). He continued being abusive because being dominant is part of being manly. Because "real men" sometimes have to show women who's boss. Because the myth in O.J.'s life made abuse of women seem "normal." If it was normal, it was minor. If minor, it could be denied. Yet all the time, O.J. knew . . .

O.J.'s denial (and ours) of the deadly seriousness of sexist abuse of women -- and children -- is deeply rooted in the gendered nature of our socialization. This gendering of men and women is encouraged and reinforced by all the social institutions of this country: the family, the church, the schools, the courts, the media and the military. For African Americans especially, our denial is also inextricably bound to our fear that our oppressions have really affected us. It is bound to our deeply felt need to see ourselves in a positive light, victorious over the wretched racism of this land. And it is bound to our widespread embrace

of myths which have been strengthened in America even though they may have been born elsewhere. Male dominance is one of these myths.

Many of us do not want to believe that O.J. committed murder. Yet now that we know about his history of abuse, now that we can see that O.J. had to have known, now that we must reckon with the deaths that happen, and will continue to happen, because sexism is so real in this country, we cannot pretend that everything is simply "black and white." Living in the United States is more complex, more dangerous, than that, and we must finally get real about all that is going on. If we don't, we will be guilty even if O.J. is found innocent.

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